


COMMENTARY

# Microaffirmations: Strategic acts that disrupt inequality

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In recent years, there has been a notable increase in regressive policies and legislation aimed at undermining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the United States. As highlighted by Follmer et al. (2024), these legislative actions actively seek to diminish or eliminate DEI-related content from educational curricula, dismantle DEI programs and initiatives, and impose restrictions on the dissemination of DEI-related knowledge. DEI initiatives in academic institutions and workplaces are crucial for creating inclusive and supportive environments for systematically marginalized and historically underrepresented individuals. As such, limiting access to or reducing awareness of DEI literacy can perpetuate discrimination, negatively impacting employees' and students' well-being, safety, and sense of belonging within educational and workplace settings (Follmer et al.; Pedler et al., 2022).

In response to these challenges, we propose an additional strategy for combating anti-DEI legislation in academia and the workplace: microaffirmations. Microaffirmations entail subtle yet impactful actions, words, or environmental cues (Rowe, 2008) that can be employed by faculty, individual practitioners, professional groups, and institutions to counteract negative messages and systemic oppression. Despite legal barriers, microaffirmations can serve as acts of kindness and resistance, promoting inclusivity and support for marginalized groups in educational (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020) and workplace environments (Rowe, 2008). To this end, this commentary argues that microaffirmations are a valuable and actionable tool to counteract the adverse effects of anti-DEI legislation. By intentionally practicing microaffirmations, individuals and institutions can foster a more inclusive culture, support marginalized individuals, and subtly challenge systemic forms of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression (Ellis et al., 2019).

## Microaffirmations

Microaffirmations can be seen as both intentional and unintentional acts that disrupt everyday discrimination, racialized putdowns, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages to people of color, also known as microaggressions (Ellis et al., 2019; Pierce, 1970, 1974; Sue et al., 2007). In the face of macro- and microaggressions, microaffirmations can affirm marginalized people's identities, acknowledge their experiences, resist inequality, and promote justice (Rolón-Dow & Bailey, 2021). These small actions can convey a sense of inclusion, value, and appreciation to those who might feel unwelcome, marginalized, or invisible in educational environments. Prominent research studies on microaffirmation in higher education have been conducted with first-generation students (see Ellis et al., 2019), students of color (see Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020), those with disabilities (see Eisenman et al., 2020), and LGBTQ+ students (see Boyce-Rosen &

Mecadon-Mann, 2023). Despite their subtlety, microaffirmations contribute to individuals feeling recognized and valued, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting a more inclusive culture (Powell et al., 2013; Rowe, 2008).

### Types of microaffirmation

Informed by Sue and colleagues (2007) microaggression taxonomy, Ellis and colleagues (2019) classified microaffirmations into three categories: microrecognitions, microvalidations, and microsupport. *Microrecognitions* involve verbal acknowledgments or environmental cues that make the recipient feel seen, recognized, appreciated, or included. *Microvalidations* consist of actions, verbal affirmations, or environmental signals that make recipients feel that their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are acknowledged, validated, legitimized, or valued.

*Microsupport* includes the sharing of concrete assistance and resources with the goal of increasing one's familiarity with such supports. Furthering the work of Ellis and colleagues (2019), Rolón-Dow and Davison (2020) identified two additional forms of microaffirmations: microtransformations and microprotections, particularly experienced by students of color and students with disabilities (see also Eisenman et al., 2020). *Microtransformations* involve reactions, verbal affirmations, or environmental signals that foster the recipient's integration into the university and instill a sense of capability for success, thereby enhancing some aspect of their social or academic life. Last, *microprotections* involve actions, verbal affirmations, or environmental signals that make the recipient feel shielded or safeguarded from harmful or derogatory behaviors, practices, and policies associated with their identity. We draw on this research and other prominent work to provide a roadmap for how faculty, academic institutions, workplaces, and professional groups can purposefully support marginalized individuals in the presence of anti-DEI legislation. We also identify contexts where microaffirmations can manifest, such as classrooms, workplaces, and professional groups.

### Affirming students through resources

In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in mental health issues among college and university students, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Duffy et al., 2019). According to a 2023 Gallup survey, emotional stress, mental health, and financial concerns are the top reasons currently enrolled students consider leaving their programs (Marken, 2024). Although microaffirmations cannot fully address the systemic challenges affecting students' college experience, they can play a role in supporting and promoting students' well-being and sense of belonging (Koch et al., 2022), which have been linked to student engagement, success, and retention (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021).

Although higher education has the unique ability to advance social mobility, the high cost of textbooks and materials can be a major obstacle for students. The weight of such costs associated with attaining a degree can strain students financially, affecting their academic success and potentially delaying their graduation, leading to increased financial burdens over time. Using open educational resources (OER) is a form of microsupport, as it provides students with accessible materials, reducing financial stress and validating their educational pursuits (Ellis et al., 2019). OER involves the use of freely available and openly licensed instructional material in higher education to create more "student-centered, equity-focused instructional practices that elevate students' knowledge and cultures and give students greater agency over their learning" (Griffiths et al., 2022, pg. 1). Educational institutions can provide other forms of microsupport, such as faculty and college administration promoting campus resources. These resources may include writing centers, free tutoring and upskilling, available food pantries, and professional thrift shops to help students succeed in their professional career. Faculty and college administration can

promote these resources in their syllabi, class and email announcements, or during meetings or office hours with students. By raising awareness about the available resources on campus, these small gestures can significantly impact students' academic behaviors, perspectives, and engagement within the academic institutions they attend (Powell *et al.*, 2013).

### **Research opportunities in I-O psychology**

A developmental program within the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology that facilitates microaffirmations for students is the Diversifying I-O Psychology Program (DIP) established by Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP). The DIP program was created with the goal of diversifying the pipeline to graduate school. The DIP program includes three key phases: (a) a free, two-day virtual conference, where students are provided with an opportunity to learn about I-O psychology and graduate studies in I-O psychology, (b) helping undergraduate students gain valuable research experience to develop critical skills for graduate school, and (c) providing participants with the opportunity to broaden their social and professional network through SIOP conference immersion. Such an experience can be empowering for students as this program successfully implemented microtransformations throughout the three phases to affirm its scholars. The DIP program can offer mentorship to students interested in conducting research on DEI-related topics despite restrictions at their universities. Specifically, in Phases 2 and 3 of the DIP program, students establish professional connections that provide access to information and exposure to research on topics not readily available at their university. With the mission and vision of the program in mind, it is clear that this initiative creates opportunities for mentors to offer microaffirmations to their DIP scholars. As a result, we urge SIOP members and affiliates to raise awareness of this program to provide students with exposure to research and critical networking opportunities that help students of marginalized backgrounds build their social capital. Although promoting the program may seem like a small act, it can have a significantly positive impact on students with an interest in the field and in conducting DEI-related research.

### **Affirming within professional groups and communities**

An additional hurdle marginalized students and employees face in institutions with limited or banned DEI-related resources is a sense of isolation, lack of community support, and obstacles to inclusion. For students, participation in student clubs and community groups can provide an inclusive and supportive environment where they feel recognized, accepted, and able to share their experiences (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2023). Recent research has revealed that such community-building spaces play a vital role in offering opportunities for microaffirmations for students. Specifically, Rolón-Dow and Davison (2020) found that spaces such as counterspaces—or community spaces that promote adaptive responses to oppression (Silverman *et al.*, 2023)—can act as a microrecognition, granting racially underrepresented students visibility and appreciation for their identities and cultural practices. Rolón-Dow and Davison (2020) also found that when students with systemically marginalized identities are among people of similar identities or backgrounds, they experience microtransformations that enhance their social and academic experiences. Further, Pérez-Huber *et al.* (2023) found that social events provided students from marginalized backgrounds with opportunities to experience microaffirmations. These healing microtransformations resulted from shared cultural intimacies, such as gestures of touch (e.g., offering a hug), visual representations (e.g., cultural altars and artwork), and traditional cultural tastes, smells, and auditory experiences—helping promote empowerment, joy, and a deep sense of belonging.

Within the SIOP, spaces for students and employees to experience microaffirmations are created by our professional community groups such as Blacks in I-O Psychology, Latinos in I-O Psychology, and Asians in I-O Psychology. In addition to contributing professional development

to its members, these groups facilitate genuine connections among members through shared cultural experiences, laughter, physical expressions of support, and communal meals. Beyond their involvement in SIOP conferences, these groups remain active on social media, regularly organizing virtual workshops and meet-ups to sustain connections and support beyond the conference setting. These professional community groups are essential as they serve as a context that can facilitate microaffirmations and support for students and employees in institutions and organizations with limited or prohibited DEI-related resources. Specifically, these groups establish physical and virtual counterspaces for marginalized students and employees nationwide to experience microaffirmations.

### **Affirming in the workplace**

Given anti-DEI legislation's impact on the workplace, practitioners can also utilize microaffirmation to counter systemic barriers and inequities within workplace setting. Rowe (2008) defined microaffirmations in the workplace as small acts of generosity, such as consistently giving credit to employees, graceful acts of listening, and providing comfort and support when others are in distress (e.g., experiencing a public attack, having an idea not work out). On the surface, microaffirmations appear to benefit all employees, yet marginalized employees are less likely to experience such positive interactions (Delston, 2021; O'Meara et al., 2020). Nonetheless, microaffirmations are valuable in the workplace, particularly for marginalized employees (Rowe, 2008). Microaffirmations such as showing a colleague that their opinion and thoughts matter in a discussion or interaction, providing helpful feedback, and recognizing someone's efforts can foster a sense of inclusivity and empowerment among employees. Moreover, microaffirmations have the potential to mitigate the negative effects of microaggression in workplace interactions. For example, in group settings, the distribution of influence over relevant team processes, such as decision-making, is often unfairly distributed between women and men. Given this dynamic, research has revealed that women are more likely to be ignored or interrupted when participating in team decision-making (see van Dijk et al., 2018).

Actively seeking and creating space for their input in meetings, monitoring microaggressions within these spaces, and providing constant developmental feedback are ways to ensure women continue to be involved in team decision-making. With the increase of workplace discrimination due to anti-DEI legislation, leaders can use microaffirmations to convey to employees that (a) their contributions are valued, (b) they are included at work, and (c) their identity is acknowledged.

### **Conclusion**

Many of us unconsciously practice microaffirmations in our daily interactions with students, colleagues, and employees. However, to effectively address inequality within educational and academic settings, we must be deliberate and purposeful in our efforts to engage in microaffirmations. By intentionally practicing microaffirmations, we can set an example for others to follow, especially those in positions of power (Rowe, 2008). Despite the widespread belief that grand acts of resistance are necessary to drive significant change, it is essential to recognize that even small actions, such as microaffirmations, can profoundly impact individual recipients by affirming their identities and supporting their academic success. Therefore, this commentary does not present microaffirmations as a complete solution to systemic inequities but rather as an actionable measure for combating the adverse effects of anti-DEI legislation within academic institutions and organizations. Additionally, this commentary offers specific examples, such as microsupports, microrecognitions, and microtransformations, to illustrate how faculty, professional groups, practitioners, and institutions can better affirm and support their students, members, and employees despite legal barriers and restrictions related to DEI funding and programing.

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